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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of

Federal-State Joint Board on
Universal Service

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CC Docket No. 96-45

**Petition For Reconsideration And Clarification
Benton Foundation and Edgemont Neighborhood Coalition**

July 17, 1997

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I. Introduction

The Benton Foundation and the Edgemont Neighborhood Coalition ("Petitioners") ask the Commission to reconsider and clarify certain provisions of its recent Universal Service Order.¹ Specifically, the Petitioners urge the Commission to create a national clearinghouse of information on states' Lifeline administration procedures and to appoint an ombudsman to assist states with adopting policies that will ensure increased subscribership in low-income households. These actions will serve the public interest by encouraging state innovation in this area and will better serve the low-income consumers the Congress and the Commission have targeted for support.

Benton, a nonpartisan, private foundation committed to strengthening public interest efforts in shaping the emerging National Information Infrastructure, believes that communications in the public interest, including the effort to connect all Americans to basic communications systems, is essential to a strong democracy. Benton's mission is to realize the social benefits made possible by the public interest use of communications. Benton bridges the worlds of philanthropy, community practice, and public policy. It develops and provides effective information and communication tools and strategies to equip and engage individuals and organizations in the emerging digital communications environment. Over the past two years, the Benton Foundation

¹ Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service. CC Docket No. 96-45. Report and Order 97-157 (released May 8, 1997) ("Universal Service Order" or "Order").

has commissioned a number of research papers on the subject of universal service and now hosts the World Wide Web's most comprehensive library of universal service and access documents.²

Edgemont Neighborhood Coalition is a community organization based in a low-income African American neighborhood in the City of Dayton, Montgomery County, Ohio. The organization is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to improving economic opportunity and the quality of life for residents of the Edgemont neighborhood. Edgemont operates an urban gardening project, a storefront office, and "Edgenet," a community computer center.

Edgemont has been an active participant in the Commission's universal service proceedings. Edgemont has long been concerned with utility matters and since 1993 has intervened in all telephone cases before the Ohio Public Utilities Commission (PUCO) involving Montgomery County. Edgemont has also filed Comments in PUCO dockets regarding disconnection and local competition.

II. The Commission Should Create A National Clearinghouse On Lifeline

Administration Procedures

The Commission encourages states to adopt "Lifeline administration procedures, including eligibility verification procedures that are as efficient as possible."³ The Commission goes on to

³ See URL <http://www.benton.org/Uniserv/>

³ See Order at ¶378.

highlight the system in place in New York State which provides automatic Lifeline enrollment through the exchange of computer files between social service agencies and the state's LECs.⁴ The Commission also concludes that "the public interest is best served by minimizing overhead expenses, and encourages state innovation in this area to better serve low-income consumers."⁵

The Petitioners agree with the Commission's goals, but urge it to address them with a workable process. New York State is rightfully highlighted by the Commission as a model of an efficient administration that clearly serves low-income consumers. But what issues did New York have to address to make this system work? What privacy concerns arise when sharing information about public assistance program participants? In comments filed in this proceeding, the New York Department of Public Service notes, "In New York, the protection of customer privacy is incumbent on all carriers. Consistent with this view, the New York Public Service Commission has adopted specific principles that offer a framework for deciding privacy related issues."⁶ In all likelihood, New York also had to address technology issues, interagency and inter-sector management issues, and a host of others. All states would benefit from the work New York has already done. By collecting information on states' administrative practices, the Commission could provide a convenient one-stop service for states as they act to update their procedures in light of the Order. Collection of this information would also aid the ongoing efforts of the

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ State of New York Department of Public Service. Comments. CC Docket No. 96-45. Filed April 11, 1996.

Federal-State Board on Universal Service to determine how to best deliver telecommunications services to these low-income consumers.

III. The Commission Should Appoint An Ombudsman To Address State Administration Procedures

As states look to adopt innovative administration procedures, they will be looking to the Commission for guidance. The Commission should appoint an ombudsman who will assist in resolving barriers to enrolling participants in Federal assistance programs and help states with eligibility requirements. The ombudsman will provide a definitive source of information on how states can best administrate Lifeline programs, set eligibility criteria that cast the widest possible net, and enhance low-income, universal service support to best meet the needs of their state.

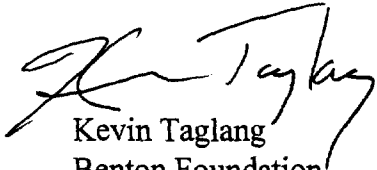
V. Conclusion

The Commission's new universal service rules are a significant step in advancing telecommunications into the homes of low-income consumers. But effective implementation of these rules will take place in the states. The sharing of best practices and the recognition of a central figure to settle disputes will go a long way to ensuring that state implementation is as good as it can be.

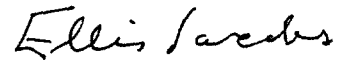
For the reasons stated above, the Commission should reconsider and clarify the parts of the Order dealing with state Lifeline administration procedures.

Respectfully submitted,

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